

November 10, 2019

The Miracles of Jesus  
Running on Empty  
Mark 7:31-37

Miracles were a large part of Jesus' earthly ministry. Webster defines a miracle as a surprising and welcomed event that is not explicable by natural or scientific laws and therefore considered to be the work of a divine agency. The miracles of Jesus are important because they underscored his message and revealed his priorities. That means, Jesus was not just a teacher or leader. He was God incarnate, who had divine power at his disposal. The miracles of Jesus are found in all four Gospels. The first miracle Jesus performed was the changing of the water into wine in Cana. The last miracle Jesus performed was when Jesus restored the ear of the arresting soldier in the garden. Only the feeding of the multitude is found in all four Gospels. The miracles of Jesus can be grouped into four categories. The first category is Jesus' authority over nature. The second category is Jesus' exorcisms. The third category is Jesus' resurrections. The fourth category is Jesus' healings. In this sermon series, *The Miracles of Jesus*, we are looking at one miracle from each category. Today, we look at a healing story.

This is the final sermon in this series. Each one of these messages came from the Gospel of Mark. It is important you know a little background about this Gospel. The author of Mark was John Mark, who was a close associate of Peter. He wrote the Gospel about the year 68 AD. Many believe it was a major source in the writing of Matthew and Luke. I can't disagree. Mark was written "in the regions of Italy" to the residents in Rome. Mark was written to promote the life of Jesus and to prepare the believers for the coming persecution. Our Gospel reading for today is Mark 7:31-37. Let me call this message *Running on Empty*.

**Mark 7:31-37** Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. <sup>32</sup> There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged Jesus to place his hand on him. <sup>33</sup> After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. <sup>34</sup> He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "*Ephphatha!*" (which means "Be opened!"). <sup>35</sup> At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened, and he began to speak plainly. <sup>36</sup> Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. <sup>37</sup> People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Jack Kornfield (Born 1945) is a best-selling American author. He once said, "*If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.*" Those are words we need to hear. If you find some wisdom in those words say, "**Amen!**"

We find ourselves today in the seventh chapter of Mark. According to the text, Jesus was in Decapolis. In other words, Jesus was outside of Galilee, where he was less popular. Decapolis was not a city, but a league of cities on the eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. Yet, even there, Jesus was known as a miracle worker. Many came to Jesus to be healed. Others brought their loved ones to Jesus to be healed. That is what happened in the scripture reading for today. People brought a man to Jesus who was deaf and could hardly speak. In the end the man is healed, but the details of the healing are hard to accept. The Master put his fingers into the man's ears, and he touched the man's tongue. The healing of the man is interesting, but the compassion in the story is magnetic. If there would have been no compassion in the story, then there would have been no healing. The man got to Jesus because the people in his life had compassion for him. Compassion is what brought Jesus to the man to be healed. Compassion is one of the great characteristics of the Christian faith. Compassion is important but it is also exhausting. That is why verse 36 of our reading is so important. Verse 36 says, "*Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it.*"

It is called the Messianic Secret. This is not the only place Jesus requests silence about a miracle. That request is heard many times in the Gospels. Why would Jesus want to keep his miracles a secret? I can answer that question with one word, protection. Jesus wanted to protect the ministry. We live in a bigger is better world, but not so with Jesus. Jesus was never interested in the crowd. Jesus was only interested in the committed. The crowd was problematic for Jesus. The crowd was stifling to Jesus' mobile ministry. Jesus said, don't tell anyone about the healings because he was protecting the ministry. However, Jesus was also protecting himself. It wasn't that Jesus didn't want to heal everyone. The problem is Jesus couldn't heal everyone for emotional reasons. Never forget, Jesus was fully human. With every healing came a story and with every story a little of Jesus's energy eroded away. Jesus didn't come to be a healer. Jesus came to establish the Kingdom of God. Jesus requested silence about the miracles because he was protecting himself. If it is true of Jesus, then it is true of us too. Can I be completely honest with you?

Church work is exhausting, because church work is a marathon. I am not just talking about professional clergy. I am talking about anyone who is actively involved in the life of the church. The reason is the church is so personal and we want to give our best to God. No one wants to disappoint God. That leads us to a problem. I have spoken of it in the past. Within the life of every church is the 90/10 Principle. It plays out in every congregation, regardless of church size. The principle says, 90% of the work that is done and 90% of the money that is donated or generated within the life of the church happens because of 10% of the people. So, let me ask you this question. Are you part

of the 90% or are you part of the 10%? If you are part of the 90% who are doing next to nothing, then do something. The 10% need your help. If you are part of the 10%, then be careful. Church work is exhausting, and fatigue is a reality. This is the truth. I am always humbled by how hard the 10% work and I am concerned they will burn out. If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**" Have you ever experienced church fatigue? Have you ever experienced church burn out?

There is a website called One Love. In one of their posts, they listed five signs of compassion fatigue. I believe, they relate to church fatigue. This is their list.

1. **Apathy:** Have you ever been apathetic about your church? It isn't hard to do. People love to promote church's shortcomings and mistakes. People love to retell church horror stories from years ago. If you take those stories personally and feel powerless to solve the problem, then you will naturally pull away and become apathetic. Have you ever been apathetic about your church? Apathy is a sign of fatigue.
2. **Anger:** Have you ever gotten angry at your church? It may be at a person or a group of people who frustrate you. Staying calm sometimes takes energy. However, you have no energy. It may, or may not, be the issue at hand. It may be something that happened years ago, and you festered on it, until it came out in anger. Have you ever gotten angry at church? Anger is a sign of fatigue.
3. **Isolation:** Have you ever isolated yourself? Have you ever avoided a fellow church member? You are afraid that person, or that group of people, will be the straw that breaks the camel's back. You don't want to explode. Your greatest desire is just to be left alone. Have you ever avoided a fellow church member? Have you ever avoided a fellow church member? Isolation is a sign of fatigue.
4. **Negativity:** Have you become a pessimist? Are you exhilarating or exhausting? Are people happier when they see you come or see you go? Is everything out of your mouth negative? Do you have an easier time complementing or criticizing? Negativity is a sign of fatigue.
5. **Fatigue:** Fatigue is a sign of fatigue. You just always tired. It is not a matter of a lack of sleep. It is a matter of lack of interest. Fatigue is a sign of fatigue.

I know these five signs are true because I have experienced them in my life. So let me ask you the question again. Have you ever experienced fatigue in the life of the church? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**" Let me say it again. It is important to take care of yourself. I have said it a million times to a million people, "If it is no longer fun, quit!"

On July 1, 2018, a new pastor was appointed to a church within this district. She was bright and passionate about Jesus. She loved her congregation and wanted to get involved in that community. She got off to a fast start. She visited everyone, and I mean everyone. In addition to preparing for Sunday morning, she visited her sick and her shut ins. Every visit came with a story, or two, of someone in their lives who were struggling. She visited them too. Everyone within her congregation loved her which made the announcement so painful to hear. She was leaving her church effective September 1. The reason she resigned was burnout. She was just as bright and passionate, but she was tired. She had burned out. She ran the marathon of the ministry like it was a 100-yard dash. She was a victim of church fatigue. It is important to take care of yourself, so you can take care of others.

Several years ago, I attended a retirement celebration for a man who had served the same church for thirty-eight years. It was his only United Methodist appointment. A great deal was made about his longevity, I was more impressed by his effectiveness. He was known for his compassion. It was about that time he took me to the side and gave me some advice. I listened to his words because I both liked and respected him. His words were straight forward. He said, "Russ, take care of yourself. Take all your days off. Take all you vacation. Take all those leaves. I didn't and now I'm burned out. No church deserves a pastor who can only give 70 percent. If I would have taken care of myself, then I may have lasted longer." I heard those word and have tried to apply them. It isn't just true of clergy. It is true of devoted laity too. I hope you take care of yourself.

Several weeks ago, Kathryn and I made a fast get away. We left town on Monday morning and were home by Friday afternoon. We made a 376 trip to Lexington, Virginia. I was my first trip there. I was ready to go. This job has a million details. We stayed across the road from the Natural Bridge. However, we never saw it. Instead, we went into Lexington, itself. It is not a big place, only a town of 7,000 people. However, it is filled with history. It is the home of the Virginia Military Institute, which we toured. It was the home of Confederate General Stonewall Jackson, who taught at VMI prior to the war. We visited his grave and saw the lemons people had left behind. Lexington is also the home of Washington and Lee College, where Robert E. Lee served as president after the war. His grave is in the basement of the chapel. Just outside the door is his horse's grave, Traveler. We took a carriage ride around the town, as the guide gave us the highlights. We drove about an hour and visited Appomattox Courthouse, where Lee surrendered to Grant, ending the Civil War. I found it fascinating. Do you know the best part of my trip to Lexington, Virginia? Kathryn and I were alone. No one knew us. We walked through the streets and talked about nothing. We ate in local restaurants uninterrupted. We drove in the car and reminisced. I would get up early and sit in the lobby. I drank a cup of coffee as I read the local paper. This was the best part. Everyone ignored me. It was great but by Friday morning, I was ready to go home and reclaim my purpose. I started to miss my job and my routine. I started to miss the people in my life. I drove home rested and ready to go. Listen to what I am trying to

say. I am not saying everyone must travel. However, I am saying everyone must do something to take care of themselves.

In our scripture reading for today, Jesus ordered silence. Don't tell anyone about my healing, because I have enough people. The Master needed to rest, and he needed to take care of himself. What do you do to care for yourself? Do you remember the quote from Jack Kornfield? He once said, "*If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"